

Mexican American Lowriders: Postmodernism as Popular Practice

by

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A lowrider is a car that has been modified in a distinctive style identified with Mexican Americans. Lowriders are also the people who drop their cars by cutting suspension springs, or by installing custom hydraulic suspensions to raise and lower their cars at will (fig. 1). One can see them cruising the streets of any city in the southwest, and occasionally other parts of the U. S. Easily identifiable with their lush custom interiors, gleaming chrome or gold-plate wheels, complex paint jobs, and the inimitable hydraulic "switches," lowriders mark the minority urban presence of the working-class Mexican American communities that innovated the style. Unlike more "folkloric" forms of popular culture that derive their criteria for authenticity from a claim of connectedness with the distant past, lowriders often traffic in the commodities and media images of the present. While this may seem at first glance to represent the abandonment of history which some critics have found typical of postmodernism, I argue in this paper that a historical reading of lowriders is possible: that is, lowrider practice constitutes a kind of popular, historical knowledge of the present. I will develop this claim by considering notions of postmodernism that emerge both in the realm of high theory and in everyday lowrider practice, and identifying a specific way in which lowriders bring an immanent critique to bear on their historical condition.

Lowriders associate their cars with pride in themselves and their communities, and identity politics has been a part of lowriding at least since the founding of *Lowrider Magazine (LRM)*. In 1977, "El Larry" Gonzalez and David Nunez were elected to the student council of San Jose State University in California, in part due to their endorsement by the great Chicano/a movement leader César Chavez. Like the French situationists of a decade before, Gonzalez and Nunez diverted university funds to their own publishing agenda, and *LRM* was born as a synthesis of Chicano politics and urban barrio style (Penland 1997: 74). Today, *LRM* maintains a political side with columns on current events and Chicano/a politics like the "Raza Report." Although it is a point of pride for its publishers that they have been supportive of the Chicano/a movement, the relationship between lowriding and political movements has not always been smooth, particularly with *LRM's* meteoric success as a publishing business.<sup>1</sup>

The at times rocky relationship between *LRM* and the Chicano/a movement is exemplary of the ambivalent relationship between popular culture and left politics. Lowriders are "popular" in the way that they expropriate commodities to their own purposes (see Fiske 1989), and valorize manual labor and barter exchange based on community and family ties. Yet the style is nonetheless profoundly associated with consumer culture - in practice, lowriding is often about being able to buy expensive commodities and display one's purchasing power. When *LRM* speaks of the "lowrider movement," it references an important history of contact with expressly political movements, but lowriders themselves are more likely to call lowriding a "lifestyle." Politics in a conventional sense are not the reason for lowriders' existence.

Discerning the politics of lifestyle practices is one of the recurring questions for critical scholarship about postmodern cultural production. For some critics, "lifestyle aestheticism" is an escape from or denial of "real" political action. In an article published as lowriding experienced a national boom in the early 1980s, anthropologist Luis Plascencia argues that the consumer culture of lowriding signals that "low riding as an expressive form was appropriated and transformed into a commodity" (1983: 171). Rather than "genuine" Mexican American culture, for Plascencia lowriders represent the colonization of an emergent Mexican American market by the automotive industry and by corporate sponsors of lowrider events, such as beer companies. While Plascencia's article contains a wealth of descriptive and historical material, something about his critique seems dated when read in the present context. In the academy, we have become used to a notion of culture which bears the taint of commerce - the idea that culture should be "authentic" and immune from commercial matters is no longer seen as a virtue or even a possibility from the viewpoint of postmodernist scholarship. Among other effects, this perspective has allowed a broadening conception of the cultural field that merits study, to include such popular practices as lowriding.

Researching lowriders is thus a postmodern pursuit in that it departs from the quest for authenticity that once characterized scholarship in a traditional folkloric or philological vein. Focussing on emergent forms of cultural production or performance in the present is a more appropriate way to understand the situations and practices of people who have experienced postmodernity as a "loss of historicity" in their lives (Jameson 1991: x; cf. Limón 1994: 109): the lowriders I knew during my field research in Austin, Texas often did not know much of the history

of lowriding beyond their own involvement or that of their friends and families. As Brenda Bright, the foremost ethnographer of lowriding, has demonstrated, framing lowriding as "traditional" is in many cases an imposition by the scholar of a category that is not meaningful to the participant (1997: 16). Indeed, lowriding has more in common with the identity practices of the 1940s pachucos, young Mexican Americans who made a strategic break with the past by donning zoot suits, speaking the syncretic language *Caló*, and in general rejecting received categories of identification from both "Mexican" and "American" sources in order to carve out a new space of subjectivity (Sánchez-Tranquilino and Tagg 1992). This is the kind of cultural work that was disparaged as a loss of the traditional culture by some of the Mexican Americans whom Américo Paredes, the godfather of Mexican American ethnography, heard complaining about the "damn-foolishness" of the young pachucos (1958, cited in Limón 1994: 93). Despite the similar reactions of disapproval lowriders receive from some quarters, Bright suggests that "low rider practices underscore the experiences and conditions of their production. Instead of simple nostalgia or tradition, low riders produce cultural images of institutional relationships..." (1997: 17).<sup>2</sup>

Lowriding can thus offer an important vantage point on the present social-historical situation. In this light, cultural research can view lowrider culture with a mind to the historical conditions of its emergence, thus treating the subject historically without resort to a historicism that locates meaning in a past moment of essential origin.

I have demonstrated that scholarly interest in lowriders is exemplary of a postmodernism of the academy. It is quite another proposition to argue that lowriders themselves are postmodern culture, or an instance of postmodernism. If I venture to say that lowrider car practices are in some ways postmodern, I can expect complaints from both sides of a theoretical debate. On one hand, I become an uncritical populist, celebrating what the lower classes do without adequately grasping that they are unenlightened or "uncultured." From another, perhaps more conventionally Marxist side, I am guilty of participating in the colonization of the popular classes by the creeping and insidious talons of capital. Yet as an ethnographer, I am inclined to risk these dangers and take lowrider postmodernism seriously. This means viewing lowriding as a kind of a material discourse that, though it is not produced by the cultural or social elite with which postmodernist aesthetics are often associated, nevertheless has something to say about the postmodern. To introduce this

perspective, I now turn to one of the better-known critics of postmodernist culture, Fredric Jameson.

*Jameson and the Problem with Postmodernism*

In a widely-read essay reprinted as the first chapter of *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), Jameson attempts to characterize postmodernism as the "cultural dominant" of the present period of late capitalism. To illustrate the historical rupture in culture that is signalled by the "post," Jameson contrasts paintings by Vincent Van Gogh and Andy Warhol. For Jameson, Van Gogh's work, while not "realist," relies on an organic connection between a critical artist and the historical situation of its subject - for example, a pairs of workman's boots - even if this is only expressed in flashes of utopian imagination signalled by bold colors or jagged brushstrokes. The key question posed by Jameson's historicism is to discern Van Gogh's relationship to the boots he painted: real boots that have a history in the real world. In postmodern art, however, Jameson identifies a glaring absence of historical connection and thus abandonment of social criticism. For example:

Andy Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes* evidently no longer speaks to us with any of the immediacy of Van Gogh's footgear; indeed, I am tempted to say that it does not really speak to us at all. Nothing in this painting organizes even a minimal place for the viewer, who confronts it at the turning of a museum corridor or gallery with all the contingency of some inexplicable natural object.... (Jameson 1991: 8-9).

By extension, Jameson questions the very possibility of critique in postmodernism, for Warhol's works, so focused as they are on commodities and fetishism, seem like rich ground for "powerful and critical political statements." Since he finds them not to contain such statements, Jameson is led "to wonder a little more seriously about the possibilities of political or radical art in the postmodern period of late capital" (1991: 9).

Jameson's portrayal of the lack of critical space in postmodernist culture suggests a parallel with what Plascencia views as a loss of authenticity in the association of Mexican American culture with lowriding. But there is an important difference. Plascencia seems to mourn the loss of "genuine and exclusive Mexican 'cultural expression,'" a category that enables an automatic politics (Is that cultural artefact authentic? I'm for it. Is it commodified? I'm against it). In contrast, Jameson attempts to avoid such a moral question, not mourning so much as pondering the apparent

loss of critique in postmodernism as indicative of the cultural expressions of a historical moment (1991: 46). Still, however, his concern about the apparent loss of historical consciousness and absence of critical space implies a failure of postmodernist culture to serve the function he ascribes to political art. Rather, for Jameson, postmodernism is symptomatic of a historical shift in capitalism, and the crisis posed to (modernist) conventions of representation is indicative of our not yet having the eyes to see the new situation properly:

My implication is that we ourselves, the human subjects who happen into this new space, have not kept pace with that evolution; there has been a mutation in the object unaccompanied as yet by any equivalent mutation in the subject. *We do not yet possess the perceptual equipment* to match this new hyperspace, as I will call it, in part because our perceptual habits were formed in that older kind of space I have called the space of high modernism (Jameson 1991: 38-39, my italics).

Yet without dwelling on high art for too long, I would posit a less dismissive view on postmodernism: that one can read works such as Warhol's as being critically concerned with representation itself. The painting is treated as a historical object, more than the shoes in the painting. If Warhol's works draw attention only to the museum as a context, that still comments on the history of works of art in museums. Transferring this notion of postmodernist critique (or metacritique) into the realm of an ethnographer's interest in subjugated knowledges (Foucault 1980) suggests the possibility that *lowriders have the eyes* to see postmodernity in ways that theory has perhaps not apprehended. The postmodernist culture that gives Jameson anxiety may be precisely the new way of seeing which he identifies as a critical need. The question raised, then, is not whether or not lowriders are political or critical, but what critical content emerges in their expression with or without their permission, and what this allows us to make of postmodern social relations.

Making a case for ethnography of the "emergent postmodern mexicano" in his landmark (1994) book *Dancing With the Devil: Society and Cultural Poetics in Mexican-American South Texas*, José Limón raises the possibility of seeking knowledge on the postmodern not in the domain of high or elite culture, but in the realm of the popular. Limón cites the famous essay on postmodernist architecture in Los Angeles in which Jameson notes in passing the "great Chicano markets on Broadway and Fourth Street" adjacent to postmodernist landmarks like Wells Fargo Court, or the Bonaventura Hotel (Jameson 1991: 12). Limón points out that it is precisely to the Mexican American barrio, teeming with everyday life, that the ethnographer or cultural critic must

look in order to understand how the condition of postmodernity or late capitalism plays out in "lived experience" (1994: 109). Noting that Jameson suggests that the cultural dominant of postmodernism must trickle down from the elite class, Limón undertakes an ethnography of the lifeways and "cultural poetics" of Mexican Americans occupying the space of postmodernity.

The image of a downward spread of postmodernism through the classes raises the question of whether the texts and practices classed as "popular" become postmodern only when they are dislocated from everyday life into the gallery or seminar room? Or, if postmodernity is, as both Jean Francois Lyotard's (1984) and David Harvey's (1989) accounts describe it (though from quite different perspectives), a "condition," and an already insidious one, then we must take seriously the experience and knowledge of those who confront the postmodern condition on the ground, in the front lines. While Limón joins Jameson in seeing a periodized postmodernity as a traumatic historical event for marginalized people, his response is to learn about history from those who experience the trauma - who, in the phrase of Cornel West, "bear the social cost" of historical transformation (1993). Rather than seeking out a premodern or uncorrupted "authentic" culture, or relying on the idealisms of high academic theorizing, Limón goes in search of the emergent postmodern mexicano to learn from his/her "eyes." It is in this vein that I look to lowriders to illuminate postmodernism as popular practice. What kinds of immanent or unconscious critique of modernity and its wakes might emerge in a serious engagement with lowrider knowledge as a kind of "postmodernism from below"?

### *What's so postmodern about a lowrider?*

Jameson's consideration of painting draws attention to the murals painted on lowrider cars as popular postmodernist art - indeed, lowriders display a tendency toward what Jameson (after Thomas Mann and, in turn, Theodor Adorno) calls "pastiche" - a rupture from historical referents that results in a fragmented, arbitrary, and dilettante iconography in which it seems that the "jumbling of elements" is "all there is" (Rabinow 1986: 249, cf. Jameson 1991: 17). In many cases, the images on lowrider murals are severed from what are conventionally thought of as Mexican-national or Chicano/a referents. Mining the ubiquitous media culture for disembodied signs, lowrider murals produce an iconography that is a diverse and apparently arbitrary

juxtaposition of images. When a group of painted lowriders get together, images of football teams like the Dallas Cowboys, musicians like Selena or Tupac Shakur, medieval knights, Aztec warriors or princesses, religious figures, John Wayne or Marilyn Monroe, cartoon characters, or historical scenes like the Alamo all parade across the surfaces of the cars in a display of semiotic excess. The relationship between these diverse iconographies and the lives of the people producing them usually bears no *necessary* historical connection - it is crafted and arbitrary. In particular, these myriad signs skating across the multiple surfaces of a lowrider often do nothing explicitly to advance the liberation of Mexican Americans or social revolution in the United States. Are they thus devoid of content, politically benign at best, or decadent?

In contrast to Jameson's concern regarding the loss of a critical position in postmodern art, I suggest that rather than being a vacuous exercise in representation without referent, lowrider practices of pastiche (like Warhol's postmodernist art) place a rhetorical emphasis on representation itself. If they neglect images of Pancho Villa in favor of Batman (and not all do) lowriders are not abandoning "their" history but are rather engaged as historical actors in a present moment which is saturated with reproducible, juxtaposable, mobile signs. In Bright's words, this produces a "cinematic poetics" that mimes the centralized and capital-intensive broadcast media which are omnipresent in U.S. society (1997: 13). The deployment of media images is not a transparent or innocent use of them - rather, it represents a "re-enactment" that shapes and is shaped by its situation (Bright 1994: 39).

Here a caveat emptor is in order, before I inadvertantly characterize all lowriding as historically naive. Over the past year *LRM* has been serializing a history of lowriding, and there are plenty of lowriders who are well-studied in historical matters and who demonstrate that in their lowrider expression. Furthermore, many lowriders join an expressive tradition of the Chicano/a movement by depicting Aztecs or Mexican revolutionary figures as historical forebears in their murals. My purpose in this paper is not to negate the work of these historically conscious lowriders, but rather to ask what about the others? It is not a requirement for participation in lowriding that one have a highly developed knowledge of Mexican American history. The lowriders that do show a concern for history are already recognized as "historical," and their work might be classed with approval as "pedagogical" by Jameson and thus in a way "less postmodern" (1991: 50). My whole point is to expand the boundaries of what counts as historical knowledge,

though, to avoid subjugating the knowledge of those lowriders who usually do not qualify as "historical." The idea is to move from a simplistic view of historical content as limited to images of the past toward a more complex understanding of the historical *use* of any images - thus historicizing the poetics of pastiche.

But pastiche is not the only formal characteristic that lowriders share with postmodernism. Perhaps foremost among the others is a concern with surfaces, even a proliferation of them, over imagined essences (figs. 2-3). Dick Hebdige has periodized similar aesthetics as part of the postmodern in his discussion of Italian scooters, industrial design, and the change from a productivist (puritan) to a consumerist (pagan) economy (1988). In the case of lowriders, this postmodern tendency is manifested in part in a concern with display value over the conventional Marxist categories of use value or exchange value. Quite in opposition to the modernist dictum that form must follow function, the process of customizing a lowrider often means intentionally sacrificing functionality - in automotive terms, "performance" - in favor of style, or in cultural-theoretical terms, "the performative." For example, custom wheels that extend out from the body of the car may displace the intended center of gravity on the axle and shorten the life of ball joints or front-wheel-drive CV (constant velocity) joints. This is not done in ignorance; it is a calculated sacrifice in the interest of displaying a gleaming custom rim and achieving the effect that lowriders call "bling bling."

Thus a kind of aesthetic "superficiality" is valued over utility. Lowrider style shares this with certain other custom car movements, a posture described by Tom Wolfe in the 60s as "Baroque Modern" (1965: 68). It would also seem to resonate with Jameson's depiction of postmodernity, in which "exchange value has been generalized to the point at which the very memory of use value is effaced..." (1991: 18). But again, the most valued lowrider modifications - such as hydraulic suspensions - dramatically decrease the resale value of a car. Furthermore, the immanently critical politics of lowrider postmodernism depends precisely on the fact that it is produced by outsiders to the commodity spectacle, a (working) class who have not had the luxury of effacing the memory of use value; they still have to get their hands dirty to fix up their cars, yet they seek to enter the field of the image as not merely spectators but participants. It is in the appropriation of the commodity as a field of signification that a struggle ensues to carve out a space of limited autonomy within a consumer economy, or perhaps only the "room to maneuver" that is

needed to produce a home space on the media landscape and an implicit critique of the very system that produced its medium (Chambers 1991).<sup>3</sup>

*Represent: The Politics of Publicity*

...the new political art (if it is possible at all) will have to hold to the truth of postmodernism, that is to say, to its fundamental object - the world space of multinational capital - at the same time at which it achieves a breakthrough to some as yet unimaginable new mode of representing this last, in which we may again begin to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by our spatial as well as our social confusion (Jameson 1991: 54).

Lowriders can be viewed historically even though the images in some lowrider murals defy historicism. By belonging profoundly to the present condition, lowriding offers an immanent critique of that condition (cf. Lefebvre 1991: 32). One form this takes is an assertion of a Mexican American presence on the landscape of signs, which I consider to be a kind of public sphere in a historical moment of ubiquitous media saturation.

Lowriders, like practitioners of various other forms of urban expressive culture (hip-hop, "gangs," etc.) are explicitly concerned with representation, an issue that is often expressed with an intransitive verb: "to represent." When I first met lowriders gathered in an Austin park on a weekend night, I asked what motivated them to go out cruising. One car club member told me they were there "to represent." Another time, while discussing an upcoming car show, a member of a different car club said that though his car was not finished enough to expect to win a trophy, he wanted to go anyway, "just to represent." To represent is the means by which one of the aims of urban expressive culture is pursued, to "get known."

What does it mean to "get known" in a media-saturated society? I propose that to assert oneself on the media landscape is to claim publicity, that is, a place in the public. The "public" here, in true neoliberal and high capitalist fashion, is represented by the increasingly *privatized* and regulated media space. The "citizens" of this private-public sphere are those who appear in such a space or who possess the technical and cultural literacy to engage and manipulate the images there. Very often, these are white, Anglo people, at least those who represent unmarked categories or default characters. Working-class, racialized populations rarely see anything of themselves except as stereotypes or villains: their lives are generally not faithfully represented in the media space. As

Ice Cube's character Doughboy, an African-American resident of south-central Los Angeles, said about the television news in John Singleton's (1991) film *"Boyz n the Hood,"* "They either don't know, don't show, or they don't care what's going on in the hood."

Yet in this situation which finds everybody who's anybody either on TV or the internet, lowriders assert themselves as representational agents (cf. Holt 2000: 108). Often lacking access to the technology, materials, and training to produce conventional media texts (such as a TV show), lowriders engage the media public by turning the public space of city traffic into a broadcast medium. Their signs are not severed from materiality, but they are hyper-material, traveling on the bulky medium of a car body. Moving throughout the city they are seen, and in being noticed, they demand to be contended with.

By asserting themselves into the public space of "known" images lowriders intervene into their historical situation. That these are Mexican American bodies (and cars) on display drags another aspect of historicity to the fore: the history of Texas as a part of Mexico colonized by northern Anglos.<sup>4</sup> By engaging the present moment of media publicity with an emergent cultural form rather than with exclusive reference to past-oriented, "folkloric" forms, lowriders refuse the colonial role of the subaltern as peripheral to the centers of society - people "without history" (Wolf 1982) or "without culture" (Rosaldo 1989). It is crucial to note that it is through, not despite, parallels or similarities to the "cultural dominant" that the immanent critique of lowriders emerges (cf. Kracauer 1995: 75ff). It does not come, in this case, through a space of essential difference or autonomous separation, as in the imaginary "Mexican American authentic" which critics like Plascencia long for. I argue that such a critique is historical in the present tense, despite the fact that for many lowriders, "traditional" is a word that refers to the rock-n-roll oldies songs that "don't know much about history..."

Thus we can begin to imagine, and as researchers look for, ways in which postmodernisms not only trickle down as a kind of infection of the noble masses (false consciousness), but how performances and texts that are truly postmodern - that is, true to the historical condition of postmodernity - are used, consumed, appropriated and produced by people in everyday life, and what these popular knowledges tell us about the "political semiotic universe" that we are all in (Limón 1994: 111). Lowrider postmodernism suggests that an ambivalence is opened up within

the processes of late capitalism - while the ubiquity of communications media produces new markets and disciplines producers and consumers, it also provides grounds on which somewhat unregulated, representational action occurs. Such action, like the aesthetic mechanics of lowriding, is by no means autonomous: lowriders are as "contaminated" by the "cultural logic of late capitalism" as any of us, and are far from fitting any seamless profile of a revolutionary proletariat. Yet cultural criticism ought to take seriously the popular knowledges produced when people inhabit the spaces of postmodernism not as passive or docile bodies, but as actors in a historical struggle who, in perhaps surprising or dangerous ways, seek to leave their stamp on the world.

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### *Abstract*

Lowriders are customized cars that are generally associated with Mexican Americans. Lowrider car style shares certain formal characteristics with postmodernism, which according to some critics rules out a politics of historical critique. On the contrary, in my fieldwork with Texas lowriders I found that that alternate knowledges about the present historical condition emerge in everyday lowrider practice. Thus I argue that as researchers and theorists of postmodernity, we can learn from the popular practices of lowriding and the immanent critique they bring to bear on the present historical moment.

### *Curriculum Vitae*

Ben Chappell (born 1971) is a Ph. D. candidate at the Américo Paredes Center for Cultural Studies, the University of Texas at Austin. He received the M. A. in anthropology from the University of Texas and the B. A. from Bethel College in Kansas. He has worked as a teacher, musician, and radio producer, and has written papers on popular culture, postmodernism, semiotics, and the ethnography of music. Samples of his work can be viewed at <http://ccwf.cc.utexas.edu/~lowrider>.

<sup>1</sup> In 1996, the Xicana Caucus of *Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano/a de Aztlán* (MEChA) introduced a resolution calling for a boycott of *LRM* in protest of the use of female bikini models on its cover. The resolution did not pass a general vote, but it prompted *LRM* to respond. After all we've done for *la raza*, the editors argued, why do these women turn against us? This controversy is part of the longer history of patriarchy and feminist critiques of it in Chicano/a politics (see Gutiérrez 1993; Chappell 2000, 1998). An account of the MEChA critique of *LRM*, including the magazine's response, was distributed on the email discussion list "Discussion/Advocacy of Human, Labor and Civil Rights," 96seradc@u.washington.edu.

<sup>2</sup> The varying usages "lowrider," "low rider," and "low-rider" highlight the fact that the term's natural habitat is in oral speech. All versions refer to the same thing.

<sup>3</sup> The kind of action I am describing is not full-blown resistance; neither do I accept a diagnosis of "false consciousness." When lowriders appropriate cars or media images, these things nonetheless remain commodities. But to fault this operation for not standing outside of capitalist relations is to suggest that there *is* an essential, uncontaminated outside. Abandoning this optimistic, even romantic notion does not preclude political action. It does suggest that what is interesting and politically expedient is to consider action in a tactical or oppositional mode, if not front-on resistance (see Sandoval 1991; de Certeau 1984).

<sup>4</sup> For an introduction to this colonization, see Paredes's seminal work (1958), Montejano's excellent history (1987), and the first chapters of Limón (1994). For a critical account of a master trope in colonial versions of this history, see the work of Richard Flores on the Alamo (e.g. 1999, 2000, and forthcoming).